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## Christmas: 1916

## O. R. HOWARD THOMSON



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(ETCHINGS)

BY

O. R. HOWARD THOMSON

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**NOTE:** The incidents in "X" have been extracted from an article by Captain Maurice Woods in "The Contemporary Review." The last line, with the exception of one word, is a phrase used by Captain Woods himself.

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Christmas: 1916

I

*“Christe eleison ———,”*

*Mounts the cry of anguished souls,  
From the depths of the bowered tropics  
To the white plains of the poles.*

*Unending and unceasing;  
Wrenched from the world's despair;  
Like the smoke of a burning mountain  
Rolls up the ancient prayer.*

II

Blood-stained and still, the pudgy priest  
Is stretched, where once the grain  
Rippled its sweet green finery  
Expectant of the rain.

Ten yards beyond, a shell-torn boy  
Curses the priest's delay;  
While o'er the field, unmoved, untouched,  
The mighty cannons play.

III

Up! and out! and across the strip  
That separates foe from foe:  
Up! and out! with a yell and a shout  
The gaunt-faced fighters go:  
Led by a stripling from the ships,  
With a song in his heart and a jest on his lips,  
Over the field to the battered trench—  
Over the field where the dead men lie  
With their filmed eyes gazing at the sky.

*“Oh damn the Germans and damn the French  
And damn the English who never blench!  
Ho! club your rifles  
And use their butts,  
And jab your bayonets  
Into their guts!”*

Swirls of smoke and jets of fire,  
Corpses ever piled up higher,  
Chests that heave and limbs that strain,  
Blinded eyes and stabs of pain,  
Gleaming steel and leaden hail  
And one flag flying in the gale.

*“Oh whoa! you fellows: the trench is won!  
And a damned good sporting job you've done:  
But the big guns' hits  
Knocked the ditch to bits,  
So stow the grin  
And dig yourselves in.*

*Oh damn the Germans and damn the French  
And damn the English who never blench!”*

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IV

Six ships running across the sea,  
As full of shrapnel as ships can be:  
Six days dodging of submarines  
And sweating over the might-have-beens:  
Six days getting to men who give  
Their lives that honor still may live:  
And six men who in an office sit  
Counting the cash they get for it.

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V

Blue sky and ten thousand stars,  
Hedged fields and evening hymn,  
And the evil planet, red-eyed Mars,  
Below the horizon's rim.

Grey shapes that sail in the air,  
Red bombs and cots ablaze:  
Women and children, blown to bits,  
To the sound of a people's praise.

VI

*“Christe eleison ———,”*

*Mounts the cry of anguished souls,  
From the depths of the bowered tropics  
To the white plains of the poles.*

*Unending and unceasing;*

*Wrenched from the world’s despair;  
Like the smoke of a burning mountain  
Rolls up the ancient prayer.*

VII

“Mother! I write these lines, for it may be that I,  
After to-night, shall never write again:  
They say we charge to-morrow, at the dawn—  
The dawns in France are very beautiful—  
Well—if I die, it will not matter much:  
You ever saw through mothers’ eyes and laid  
Over my dull metal, broad sheets of gold  
From out the stores of your great treasury of love.  
So, do not cry. I do not grudge my life.  
What better usage could I make of it  
Than cast it, as a woman casteth jewels,  
Upon my country’s altar? Time ever moves  
A stream, majestic, towards its far-off goal;  
’Tis only we, foam-flecks upon its breast  
Dream it knows turmoil; or whinny like to mares  
Robbed of their foals, because we are absorbed  
Before we have grown tired of the light,  
Into its darker depths. Dear! God still lives;  
And noble faiths, resplendent as God’s self,  
Live on with him. Visions of right and faith,  
Now lonely flowers in a wilderness  
Of weeds, making the world a garden: high hopes  
Of brotherhood: emergence of broad streams  
Of human joyousness: of simple rights,  
Not guarded by long trains of cannonry,  
But like fair Kings, enshrined within the hearts  
Of all their peoples, by the peoples’ love:  
Laughter of children \_\_\_\_\_,”

VIII

Oh, of old they offered her rosemary  
And silk veils for her head:  
But now they offer her unbleached sheets  
And wet clay for a bed.

They will lay her down with her face to the north,  
The red cross on her arm,  
And a priest will mumble a hurried mass  
To guard her soul from harm:

And some of the men will pray and some,  
Unfearing men and strong,  
Will figure the price that must be paid  
By those who did the wrong.

IX

“Oh, hops? Yes, he knew hops—damned little more!  
For all his forty years, before this war  
He never stretched his legs outside of Kent.  
Hops need much watching! so like a mole he spent  
His life in his own burrows, training hops  
To grow up sticks. His prayers were for his crops,  
If he made prayers at all. Ten months each year  
He sweated, that the taverns might sell beer  
Of which he bought one pot each night, himself,  
To make him dream of—hops! The heaped-up wealth  
Of India, had not dragged him from the fields  
Before the fruit the giant green vine yields,  
Was safe within the oasts. Italian skies;  
Fair women wearing silken draperies;  
Soaring cathedrals; statues, gleaming white  
Midst cypress trees upon a moon-lit night;  
The song of poets; music, bridging space—  
He had not heard of: but, his face  
Would brighten somewhat if one mentioned hops,  
Or chestnuts, pollarded, to grow their props.  
God, a dull oaf! And now, beneath a sun  
That kisses grapes, not hops, his drab life done,  
From all his stupid, hop-made cares released,  
He spreads for kites and crows a dubious feast.  
Yet, as I live, I heard him as he fought  
For breath, and with his short-nailed, coarse hands  
caught  
At the brown stubble in his pain, mutter of faith  
Kept to the death; and of a shining wraith  
That men call English honor; of a light,  
Born in Arthurian times, which by its might  
Would break fair highways for a later breed  
Of nobler men. Good God! queer words indeed,  
For one whose life was dedicate to hops!”

X

Within the crater, where dead men, in rows,  
Lay like sardines, against each other pressed,  
A calm-eyed Tommy smoked his short-stemmed clay,  
And spread his breakfast on a dead man's chest.

Green skins and breakfast tea! My stomach retched,  
And in a trench, abandoned on my right,  
I sought a moment's respite from the filth,  
The lust and fury of the hellish fight.

Would God, I had not gone! from out the trench's clay  
A corpse, from its waist up, protruded evilly,  
Naked, with blue veins raised upon white flesh—  
The blasting climax of indecency!

XI

*“Christe eleison ———,”*

*Mounts the cry of anguished souls,  
From the depths of the bowered tropics  
To the white plains of the poles.*

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